

Chapter 1. Sicca Veneria

1 {1} IN no province of the vast Roman empire, as it existed in the middle of the third
2 century, did Nature wear a richer or a more joyous garb than she displayed in
3 Proconsular Africa, a territory of which Carthage was the metropolis, and Sicca might be
4 considered the centre. The latter city, which was the seat of a Roman colony, lay upon a
5 precipitous or steep bank, which led up along a chain of hills to a mountainous track in
6 the direction of the north and east. In striking contrast with this wild and barren region
7 was the view presented by the west and south, where for many miles stretched a
8 smiling champaign, exuberantly wooded, and varied with a thousand hues, till it was
9 terminated at length by the successive tiers of the Atlas, and the dim and fantastic forms
10 of the Numidian mountains. The immediate neighbourhood of the city was occupied by
11 gardens, vineyards, cornfields, {2} and meadows, crossed or encircled here by noble
12 avenues of trees or the remains of primeval forests, there by the clustering groves
13 which wealth and luxury had created. This spacious plain, though level when compared
14 with the northern heights by which the city was backed, and the peaks and crags which
15 skirted the southern and western horizon, was discovered, as light and shadow travelled
16 with the sun, to be diversified with hill and dale, upland and hollow; while orange
17 gardens, orchards, olive and palm plantations held their appropriate sites on the slopes
18 or the bottoms. Through the mass of green, which extended still more thickly from the
19 west round to the north, might be seen at intervals two solid causeways tracking their
20 persevering course to the Mediterranean coast, the one to the ancient rival of Rome, the
21 other to Hippo Regius in Numidia. Tourists might have complained of the absence of
22 water from the scene; but the native peasant would have explained to them that the eye
23 alone had reason to be discontented, and that the thick foliage and the uneven surface
24 did but conceal what mother earth with no niggard bounty supplied. The Bagradas,
25 issuing from the spurs of the Atlas, made up in depth what it wanted in breadth of bed,
26 and ploughed the rich and yielding mould with its rapid stream, till, after passing Sicca in
27 its way, it fell into the sea near Carthage. It was but the largest of a multitude of others,
28 most of them tributaries to it, deepening as much as they increased it. While channels
29 had been cut from the larger rills for the irrigation {3} of the open land, brooks, which
30 sprang up in the gravel which lay against the hills, had been artificially banked with cut
31 stones or paved with pebbles; and where neither springs nor rivulets were to be found,
32 wells had been dug, sometimes to the vast depth of as much as 200 fathoms, with such
33 effect that the spurting column of water had in some instances drowned the zealous
34 workmen who had been the first to reach it. And, while such were the resources of less
35 favoured localities or seasons, profuse rains descended over the whole region for one
36 half of the year, and the thick summer dews compensated by night for the daily tribute
37 extorted by an African sun.

38 At various distances over the undulating surface, and through the woods, were seen the
39 villas and the hamlets of that happy land. It was an age when the pride of architecture
40 had been indulged to the full; edifices, public and private, mansions and temples, ran off
41 far away from each market-town or borough, as from a centre, some of stone or marble,
42 but most of them of that composite of fine earth, rammed tight by means of frames, for
43 which the Saracens were afterwards famous, and of which specimens remain to this

44 day, as hard in surface, as sharp at the angles, as when they first were finished. Every
45 here and there, on hill or crag, crowned with basilicas and temples, radiant in the sun,
46 might be seen the cities of the province or of its neighbourhood, Thibursicumbr,
47 Thugga, Laribus, Siguessa, Sufetula, and many others; while in the far distance, on an
48 elevated table-land {4} under the Atlas, might be discerned the Colonia Scillitana,
49 famous about fifty years before the date of which we write for the martyrdom of
50 Speratus and his companions, who were beheaded at the order of the proconsul for
51 refusing to swear by the genius of Rome and the emperor.

52 If the spectator now takes his stand, not in Sicca itself, but about a quarter of a mile to
53 the south-east, on the hill or knoll on which was placed the cottage of Agellius, the city
54 itself will enter into the picture. Its name, Sicca Veneria, if it be derived (as some
55 suppose) from the Succoth benoth, or "tents of the daughters," mentioned by the
56 inspired writer as an object of pagan worship in Samaria, shows that it owed its
57 foundation to the Phoenician colonists of the country. At any rate, the Punic deities
58 retained their hold upon the place; the temples of the Tyrian Hercules and of Saturn, the
59 scene of annual human sacrifices, were conspicuous in its outline, though these and all
60 other religious buildings in it looked small beside the mysterious antique shrine devoted
61 to the sensual rites of the Syrian Astarte. Public baths and a theatre, a capitol, imitative
62 of Rome, a gymnasium, the long outline of a portico, an equestrian statue in brass of
63 the Emperor Severus, were grouped together above the streets of a city, which, narrow
64 and winding, ran up and down across the hill. In its centre an extraordinary spring threw
65 up incessantly several tons of water every minute, and was inclosed by the superstitious
66 gratitude of the inhabitants with the peristylum of a {5} sacred place. At the extreme
67 back, towards the north, which could not be seen from the point of view where we last
68 stationed ourselves, there was a sheer descent of rock, bestowing on the city, when it
69 was seen at a distance on the Mediterranean side, the same bold and striking
70 appearance which attaches to Castro Giovanni, the ancient Enna, in the heart of Sicily.

71 And now, withdrawing our eyes from the panorama, whether in its distant or nearer
72 objects, if we would at length contemplate the spot itself from which we have been last
73 surveying it, we shall find almost as much to repay attention, and to elicit admiration.
74 We stand in the midst of a farm of some wealthy proprietor, consisting of a number of
75 fields and gardens, separated from each other by hedges of cactus or the aloe. At the
76 foot of the hill, which sloped down on the side furthest from Sicca to one of the
77 tributaries of the rich and turbid river of which we have spoken, a large yard or garden,
78 intersected with a hundred artificial rills, was devoted to the cultivation of the beautiful
79 and odoriferous *khennah*. A thick grove of palms seemed to triumph in the refreshment
80 of the water's side, and lifted up their thankful boughs towards heaven. The barley
81 harvest in the fields which lay higher up the hill was over, or at least was finishing; and
82 all that remained of the crop was the incessant and importunate chirping of the *cicadæ*,
83 and the rude booths of reeds and bulrushes, now left to wither, in which the peasant
84 boys found shelter from the sun, while in an earlier month they frightened {6} from the
85 grain the myriads of linnets, goldfinches, and other small birds who, as in other
86 countries, contested with the human proprietor the possession of it. On the
87 southwestern slope lies a neat and carefully dressed vineyard, the vine-stakes of which,

88 dwarfish as they are, already cast long shadows on the eastern side. Slaves are
89 scattered over it, testifying to the scorching power of the sun by their broad *petasus*,
90 and to its oppressive heat by the scanty *subligarium*, which reached from the belt or
91 girdle to the knees. They are engaged in cutting off useless twigs to which the last
92 showers of spring have given birth, and are twisting those which promise fruit into
93 positions where they will be safe both from the breeze and from the sun. Everything
94 gives token of that gracious and happy season which the great Latin poets have
95 hymned in their beautiful but heathen strains; when, after the heavy rains, and raw
96 mists, and piercing winds, and fitful sun-gleams of a long six months, the mighty mother
97 manifests herself anew, and pours out the resources of her innermost being for the life
98 and enjoyment of every portion of the vast whole;—or, to apply the lines of a modern
99 bard—

100 "When the bare earth, till now
101 Desert and bare, unsightly, unadorned,
102 Brings forth the tender grass, whose verdure clads
103 Her universal face with pleasant green;
104 Then herbs of every leaf, that sudden flower,
105 Opening their various colours, and make gay
106 Her bosom, swelling sweet; and, these scarce blown, {7}
107 Forth flourishes the clustering vine, forth creeps
108 The swelling gourd, up stands the corny reed
109 Embattled in her fields, and the humble shrub,
110 And bush with frizzled hair implicit; last
111 Rise, as in dance, the stately trees, and spread
112 Their branches hung with copious fruit, or gem
113 Their blossoms; with high woods the hills are crowned
114 With tufts the valleys, and each fountain side
115 With borders long the rivers; that earth now
116 Seems like to heaven, a seat where gods might dwell,
117 Or wander with delight, and love to haunt
118 Her sacred shades."

119 A snatch from some old Greek chant, with something of plaintiveness in the tone, issues
120 from the thicket just across the mule-path, cut deep in the earth, which reaches from the
121 city gate to the streamlet; and a youth, who had the appearance of the assistant bailiff
122 or *procurator* of the farm, leaped from it, and went over to the labourers, who were busy
123 with the vines. His eyes and hair and the cast of his features spoke of Europe; his
124 manner had something of shyness and reserve, rather than of rusticity; and he wore a
125 simple red tunic with half sleeves, descending to the knee, and tightened round him by
126 a belt. His legs and feet were protected by boots which came half up his calf. He
127 addressed one of the slaves, and his voice was gentle and cheerful.

128 "Ah, Sansar!" he cried, "I don't like your way of managing these branches so well as my
129 own; but it is a difficult thing to move an old fellow like you. You never fasten together

130 the shoots which you don't cut off, they are flying about quite wild, and the first {8} ox
131 that passes through the field next month for the ploughing will break them off."

132 He spoke in Latin; the man understood it, and answered him in the same language,
133 though with deviations from purity of accent and syntax, not without parallel in
134 the *talkee-talkee* of the West Indian negro.

135 "Ay, ay, master," he said, "ay, ay; but it's all a mistake to use the plough at all. The fork
136 does the work much better, and no fear for the grape. I hide the tendril under the leaf
137 against the sun, which is the only enemy we have to consider."

138 "Ah! but the fork does not raise so much dust as the plough and the heavy cattle which
139 draw it," returned Agellius; "and the said dust does more for the protection of the tendril
140 than the shade of the leaf."

141 "But those huge beasts," retorted the slave, "turn up great ridges, and destroy the yard."

142 "It's no good arguing with an old vinedresser, who had formed his theory before I was
143 born," said Agellius good-humouredly; and he passed on into a garden beyond.

144 Here were other indications of the happy month through which the year was now
145 travelling. The garden, so to call it, was a space of several acres in extent; it was one
146 large bed of roses, and preparation was making for extracting their essence, for which
147 various parts of that country are to this day celebrated. Here was another set of
148 labourers, and {9} a man of middle age was surveying them at his leisure. His business-
149 like, severe, and off-hand manner bespoke the *villicus* or bailiff himself.

150 "Always here," said he, "as if you were a slave, not a Roman, my good fellow; yet slaves
151 have their Saturnalia; always serving, not worshipping the all-bounteous and all-
152 blessed. Why are you not taking holiday in the town?"

153 "Why should I, sir?" asked Agellius; "don't you recollect old Hiempsal's saying about
154 'one foot in the slipper, and one in the shoe.' Nothing would be done well if I were a
155 town-goer. You engaged me, I suppose, to be here, not there."

156 "Ah!" answered he, "but at this season the empire, the genius of Rome, the customs of
157 the country, demand it, and above all the great goddess Astarte and her genial, jocund
158 month. 'Parturit almus ager;' you know the verse; do not be out of tune with Nature, nor
159 clash and jar with the great system of the universe."

160 A cloud of confusion, or of distress, passed over Agellius's face. He seemed as if he
161 wished to speak; at length he merely said, "It's a fault on the right side in a servant, I
162 suppose."

163 "I know the way of your people," Vitricus replied, "Corybantians, Phrygians, Jews, what
164 do you call yourselves? There are so many fantastic religions now-a-days. Hang

165 yourself outright at your house-door, if you are tired of living—and you are a sensible
166 fellow. How can any man, whose head sits right upon {10} his shoulders, say that life is
167 worth having, and not worth enjoying?"

168 "I am a quiet being," answered Agellius, "I like the country, which you think so tame, and
169 care little for the flaunting town. Tastes differ."

170 "Town! you need not go to Sicca," answered the bailiff, "all Sicca is out of town. It has
171 poured into the fields, and groves, and river side. Lift up your eyes, man alive, open
172 your ears, and let pleasure flow in. Be passive under the sweet breath of the goddess,
173 and she will fill you with ecstasy."

174 It was as Vitricus had said; the solemn feast-days of Astarte were in course of
175 celebration; of Astarte, the well-known divinity of Carthage and its dependent cities,
176 whom Heliogabalus had lately introduced to Rome, who in her different aspects was at
177 once Urania, Juno, and Aphrodite, according as she embodied the idea of the
178 philosopher, the statesman, or the vulgar; lofty and intellectual as Urania, majestic and
179 commanding as Juno, seductive as the goddess of sensuality and excess.

180 "There goes the son of as good and frank a soldier as ever brandished pilum," said
181 Vitricus to himself, "till in his last years some infernal god took umbrage at him, and
182 saddled him and his with one of those absurd superstitions which are as plentiful here
183 as serpents. He indeed was too old himself to get much harm from it; but it shows its
184 sour nature in these young shoots. A good servant, but the plague's in his bones, and
185 he will rot." {11}

186 His subordinate's reflections were of a different character: "The very air breathes sin
187 today," he cried; "oh that I did not find the taint of the city in these works of God! Alas!
188 sweet Nature, the child of the Almighty, is made to do the fiend's work, and does it
189 better than the town. O ye beautiful trees and fair flowers, O bright sun and balmy air,
190 what a bondage ye are in, and how do ye groan till you are redeemed from it! Ye are
191 bond-slaves, but not willingly, as man is; but how will you ever be turned to nobler
192 purpose? How is this vast, this solid establishment of error, the incubus of many
193 thousand years, ever to have an end? You yourselves, dear ones, will come to nought
194 first. Anyhow, the public way is no place for me this evening. They'll soon be back from
195 their accursed revelry."

196 A sound of horns and voices had been heard from time to time through the woods, as if
197 proceeding from parties dispersed through them; and in the growing twilight might be
198 seen lights, glancing and wandering through the foliage. The cottage in which Agellius
199 dwelt was on the other side of the hollow bridle-way which crossed the hill. To make for
200 home he had first to walk some little distance along it; and scarcely had he descended
201 into it for that purpose, when he found himself in the front of a band of revellers, who
202 were returning from some scene of impious festivity. They were arrayed in holiday
203 guise, as far as they studied dress at all; the symbols of idolatry were on their foreheads
204 and arms; {12} some of them were intoxicated, and most of them were women.

205 "Why have you not been worshipping, young fellow?" said one.

206 "Comely built," said another, "but struck by the furies. I know the cut of him."

207 "By Astarte," said a third, "he's one of those sly Gnostics! I have seen the chap before,
208 with his hang-dog look. He is one of Pluto's whelps, first cousin to Cerberus, and his
209 name's Channibal."

210 On which they all began to shout out, "I say, Channibal, Channibal, here's a lad that
211 knows you. Old fellow, come along with us;" and the speaker made a dash at him.

212 On this Agellius, who was slowly making his way past them on the broken and steep
213 path, leapt up in two or three steps to the ridge, and went away in security; when one
214 woman cried out, "O the toad, I know him now; he is a wizard; he eats little children;
215 didn't you see him make that sign? It's a charm. My sister did it; the fool left me to be
216 one of them. She was ever doing so" (mimicking the sign of the cross). He's a Christian,
217 blight him! He'll turn us into beasts."

218 "Cerberus, bite him!" said another, "he sucks blood;" and taking up a stone, she made it
219 whiz past his ear as he disappeared from view. A general scream of contempt and
220 hatred followed. "Where's the ass's head? put out the lights, put out the lights! gibbet
221 him! That's why he has not been with honest {13} people down in the vale." And then
222 they struck up a blasphemous song, the sentiments of which we are not going even to
223 conceive, much less to attempt in words.

Chapter 2. Christianity in Sicca

224 {14} THE revellers went on their way; Agellius went on his, and made for his lowly and
225 lonely cottage. He was the elder of the two sons of a Roman legionary of the Secunda
226 Italica, who had settled with them in Sicca, where he lost their mother, and died, having
227 in his old age become a Christian. The fortitude of some confessors at Carthage in the
228 persecution of Severus had been the initial cause of his conversion. He had been
229 posted as one of their guards, and had attended them to the scene of their martyrdom,
230 in addition to the civil force, to whom in the proconsulate the administration of the law
231 was committed. Therefore, happily for him, it could not fall to his duty to be their
232 executioner, a function which, however revolting to his feelings, he might not have had
233 courage to decline. He remained a pagan, though he could not shake off the impression
234 which the martyrs had made upon him; and, after completing his time of service, he
235 retired to the protection of some great friends in Sicca, his brother's home already. Here
236 he took a second wife of the old Numidian stock, and supported himself by the produce
237 of a small piece of land which had been given to him for life by the imperial government.
238 {15} If trial were necessary in order to keep alive the good seed which had been sown in
239 his heart, he found a never-failing supply of that article in the companion of his declining
240 years. In the hey-day of her youth she might have been fitted to throw a sort of
241 sunshine, or rather torchlight, on a military carouse; but now, when poor Strabo, a man
242 well to do in the world, looking for peace, had fallen under her arts, he found he had

243 surrendered his freedom to a malignant, profligate woman, whose passions made her
244 better company for evil spirits than for an invalided soldier. Indeed, as time went on, the
245 popular belief, which she rather encouraged, went to the extent that she actually did
246 hold an intercourse with the unseen world; and certainly she matured in a hatred
247 towards God and man, which would naturally follow, and not unnaturally betoken, such
248 intercourse. The more, then, she inflicted on him her proficiency in these amiable
249 characteristics, the more he looked out for some consolation elsewhere; and the more
250 she involved herself in the guilt or the repute of unlawful arts, the more was he drawn to
251 that religion, where alone to commune with the invisible is to hold intercourse with
252 heaven, not with hell. Whether so great a trial supplied a more human inducement for
253 looking towards Christianity, it is impossible to say. Most men, certainly Roman soldiers,
254 may be considered to act on mixed motives; but so it was in fact, that, on his becoming
255 in his last years a Christian, he found, perhaps discovered, to his great satisfaction, that
256 the {16} Church did not oblige him to continue or renew a tie which bound him to so
257 much misery, and that he might end his days in a tranquillity which his past life required,
258 and his wife's presence would have precluded. He made a good end; he had been
259 allowed to take the blessed sacrament from the altar to his own home on the last time
260 he had been able to attend a *synaxis* of the faithful, and thus had communicated at least
261 six months within his decease; and the priest who anointed him at the beginning of his
262 last illness also took his confession. He died, begging forgiveness of all whom he had
263 injured, and giving large alms to the poor. This was about the year 286, in the midst of
264 that long peace of the Church, which was broken at length by the Decian persecution.

265 This peace of well-nigh fifty years had necessarily a peculiar, and not a happy effect
266 upon the Christians of the proconsulate. They multiplied in the greater and the maritime
267 cities, and made their way into positions of importance, whether in trade or the
268 governmental departments; they extended their family connections, and were on good
269 terms with the heathen. Whatever jealousy might be still cherished against the Christian
270 name, nevertheless, individual Christians were treated with civility, and recognised as
271 citizens; though among the populace there would be occasions, at the time of the more
272 solemn pagan feasts, when accidental outbursts might be expected of the antipathy
273 latent in the community, as we have {17} been recording in the foregoing chapter. Men
274 of sense, however, began to understand them better, and to be more just to the
275 reasonableness of their faith. This would lead them to scorn Christianity less, but it
276 would lead them to fear it more. It was no longer a matter merely for the populace to
277 insult, but for government deliberately to put down. The prevailing and still growing
278 unbelief among the lower classes of the population did but make a religion more
279 formidable, which, as heathen statesmen felt, was able to wield the weapons of
280 enthusiasm and zeal with a force and success unknown even to the most fortunate
281 impostors among the Oriental or Egyptian hierophants. The philosophical schools were
282 impressed with similar apprehensions, and had now for fifty years been employed in
283 creating and systematising a new intellectual basis for the received paganism.

284 But, while the signs of the times led to the anticipation that a struggle was impending
285 between the heads of the state religion and of the new worship which was taking its
286 place, the great body of Christians, laymen and ecclesiastics, were on better and better

287 terms, individually, with the members of society, or what is now called the public; and
288 without losing their faith or those embers of charity which favourable circumstances
289 would promptly rekindle, were, it must be confessed, in a state of considerable
290 relaxation; they often were on the brink of deplorable sins, and sometimes fell over the
291 brink. And many would join the Church on inferior motives as soon as {18} no great
292 temporal disadvantage attached to the act; or the families of Christian parents might
293 grow up with so little of moral or religious education as to make it difficult to say why
294 they called themselves members of a divine religion. Mixed marriages would increase
295 both the scandal and the confusion.

296 "A long repose," says St. Cyprian, speaking of this very period, "had corrupted the
297 discipline which had come down to us. Every one was applying himself to the increase
298 of wealth; and, forgetting both the conduct of the faithful under the Apostles, and what
299 ought to be their conduct in every age, with insatiable eagerness for gain devoted
300 himself to the multiplying of possessions. The priests were wanting in religious
301 devotedness, the ministers in entireness of faith; there was no mercy in works, no
302 discipline in manners. Men wore their beards disfigured, and woman dyed their faces.
303 Their eyes were changed from what God made them, and a lying colour was passed
304 upon the hair. The hearts of the simple were misled by treacherous artifices, and
305 brethren became entangled in seductive snares. Ties of marriage were formed with
306 unbelievers; members of Christ abandoned to the heathen. Not only rash swearing was
307 heard, but even false; persons in high place were swollen with contemptuousness;
308 poisoned reproaches fell from their mouths, and men were sundered by unabating
309 quarrels. Numerous bishops, who ought to be an encouragement and example to
310 others, despising their sacred calling, engaged themselves {19} in secular vocations,
311 relinquished their sees, deserted their people, strayed among foreign provinces, hunted
312 the markets for mercantile profits, and tried to amass large sums of money, while they
313 had brethren starving within the Church; took possession of estates by fraudulent
314 proceedings, and multiplied their gains by accumulated usuries." [Note]

315 The relaxation which would extend the profession of Christianity in the larger cities
316 would contract or extinguish it in remote or country places. There would be little zeal to
317 keep up Churches, which could not be served without an effort or without secular loss.
318 Carthage, Utica, Hippo, Milevis, or Curubis, was a more attractive residence than the
319 towns with uncouth African names, which amaze the ecclesiastical student in the Acts
320 of the Councils. Vocations became scarce; sees remained vacant, congregations died
321 out. This was pretty much the case with the Church and see of Sicca. At the time of
322 which we write, history preserves no record of any bishop as exercising his pastoral
323 functions in that city. In matter of fact there was none. The last bishop, an amiable old
324 man, had in the course of years acquired a considerable extent of arable land, and
325 employed himself principally, for lack of more spiritual occupation, in reaping, stacking,
326 selling, and sending off his wheat for the Roman market. His deacon had been
327 celebrated in early youth for his boldness in the chase, and took part in the capture of
328 lions and panthers (an act of charity {20} towards the peasants round Sicca) for the
329 Roman amphitheatre. No priests were to be found, and the bishop became *parochus* till
330 his death. Afterwards infants and catechumens lost baptism; parents lost faith, or at

331 least love; wanderers lost repentance and conversion. For a while there was a
332 flourishing meeting-house of Tertullianists, who had scared more humble minds by
333 pronouncing the eternal perdition of every Catholic; there had also been various
334 descriptions of Gnostics, who had carried off the clever youths and restless speculators;
335 and then there had been the lapse of time, gradually consuming the generation which
336 had survived the flourishing old days of the African Church. And the result was, that in
337 the year 250 it was difficult to say of whom the Church of Sicca consisted. There was no
338 bishop, no priest, no deacon. There was the old *mansionarius* or sacristan; there were
339 two or three pious women, married or single, who owed their religion to good mothers;
340 there were some slaves who kept to their faith, no one knew how or why; there were a
341 vast many persons who ought to be Catholics, but were heretics, or nothing at all, or all
342 but pagans, and sure to become pagans on the asking; there were Agellius and his
343 brother Juba, and how far these two had a claim to the Christian name we now proceed
344 to explain.

345 They were about the ages of seven and eight when their father died, and they fell under
346 the guardianship of their uncle, whose residence at Sicca had been one {21} of the
347 reasons which determined Strabo to settle there. This man, being possessed of some
348 capital, drove a thriving trade in idols, large and small, amulets, and the like instruments
349 of the established superstition. His father had come to Carthage in the service of one of
350 the assessors of the proconsul of the day; and his son, finding competition ran too high
351 to give him prospect of remuneration in the metropolis, had opened his statue-shop in
352 Sicca. Those modern arts which enable an English town in this day to be so fertile in the
353 production of ware of this description for the markets of the pagan East, were then
354 unknown; and Jucundus depended on certain artists whom he imported, especially on
355 two Greeks, brother and sister, who came from some isle on the Asian coast, for the
356 supply of his trade. He was a good-natured man, self-indulgent, positive, and warmly
357 attached to the reigning paganism, both as being the law of the land and the vital
358 principle of the state; and, while he was really kind to his orphan nephews, he simply
359 abominated, as in duty bound, the idiotic cant and impudent fee-fa-fum, to which, in his
360 infallible judgment, poor old Strabo had betrayed his children. He would have restored
361 them, you may be quite sure, to their country and to their country's gods, had they
362 acquiesced in the restoration: but in different ways these little chaps, and he shook his
363 head as he said it, were difficult to deal with. Agellius had a very positive opinion of his
364 own on the matter; and as for Juba, though he had no opinion at all, yet he had an {22}
365 equally positive aversion to have thrust on him by another any opinion at all, even in
366 favour of paganism. He had remained in his catechumen state since he grew up,
367 because he found himself in it; and though nothing would make him go forward in his
368 profession of Christianity, no earthly power would be able to make him go back. So
369 there he was, like a mule, struck fast in the door of the Church, and feeling a
370 gratification in his independence of mind. However, whatever his profession might be,
371 still, as time went on, he plainly took after his step-mother, renewed his intercourse with
372 her after his father's death, and at length went so far as to avow that he believed in
373 nothing but the devil, if even he believed in him. It was scarcely safe, however, to affirm
374 that the senses of this hopeful lad were his own.

375 Agellius, on the other hand, when a boy of six years old, had insisted on receiving
376 baptism; had perplexed his father by a manifestation of zeal to which the old man was a
377 stranger; and had made the good bishop lose the corn-fleet which was starting for Italy
378 from his importunity to learn the Catechism. Baptized he was, confirmed,
379 communicated; but a boy's nature is variable, and by the time Agellius had reached
380 adolescence, the gracious impulses of his childhood had in some measure faded away,
381 though he still retained his faith in its first keenness and vigour. But he had no one to
382 keep him up to his duty; no exhortations, no example, no sympathy. His father's friends
383 had taken him up so far as this, that by an extraordinary favour {23} they had got him a
384 lease for some years of the property which Strabo, a veteran soldier, had held of the
385 imperial government. The care of this small property fell upon him, and another and
386 more serious charge was added to it. The long prosperity of the province had increased
387 the opulence and enlarged the upper class of Sicca. Officials, contractors, and servants
388 of the government had made fortunes, and raised villas in the neighbourhood of the city.
389 Natives of the place, returning from Rome, or from provincial service elsewhere, had
390 invested their gains in long leases of state lands, or of the farms belonging to the
391 imperial *res privata* or privy purse, and had become virtual proprietors of the rich fields
392 or beautiful gardens in which they had played as children. One of such persons, who
393 had had a place in the *officium* of the quæstor, or rather procurator, as he began to be
394 called, was the employer of Agellius. His property adjoined the cottage of the latter; and,
395 having first employed the youth from recollection of his father, he confided to him the
396 place of under-bailiff from the talents he showed for farm-business.

397 Such was his position at the early age of twenty-two; but honourable as it was in itself,
398 and from the mode in which it was obtained, no one would consider it adapted, under
399 the circumstances, to counteract the religious languor and coldness which had grown
400 upon him. And in truth he did not know where he stood further than that he was firm in
401 faith, as we have said, and had shrunk from a boy upwards, from the vice {24} and
402 immorality which was the very atmosphere of Sicca. He might any day be betrayed into
403 some fatal inconsistency, which would either lead him into sin, or oblige him abruptly to
404 retrace his steps, and find a truer and safer position. He was not generally known to be
405 a Christian, at least for certain, though he was seen to keep clear of the established
406 religion. It was not that he hid, so much as that the world did not care to know, what he
407 believed. In that day there were many rites and worships which kept to themselves—
408 many forms of moroseness or misanthropy, as they were considered, which withdrew
409 their votaries from the public ceremonial. The Catholic faith seemed to the multitude to
410 be one of these; it was only in critical times, when some idolatrous act was insisted on
411 by the magistrate, that the specific nature of Christianity was tested and detected. Then
412 at length it was seen to differ from all other religious varieties by that irrational and
413 disgusting obstinacy, as it was felt to be, which had rather suffer torments and lose life
414 than submit to some graceful, or touching, or at least trifling observance which the
415 tradition of ages had sanctioned.

416 Note

417 *Vide* Oxford transl. of St. Cyprian.